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[New Extractivism, Peasantries and Social Dynamics: Critical Perspectives and Debates]

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From Agrarian Production to Landed Extraction: New
Dynamics of Rural ‘Accumulation from Above and from Below’
in South Africa’s Communal Areas

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From Agrarian Production to Landed Extraction: New Dynamics of Rural 'Accumulation from Above and from Below' in South Africa's Communal Areas

Gavin Capps¹

Abstract

This paper investigates the new dynamics of rural accumulation that are emerging from above and below in the context of the rapid expansion of extractive investment into the former 'homeland' areas of South Africa. In the classical rendering of the agrarian question, the distinction between 'accumulation from above' (AFA) and 'accumulation from below' (AFB) referred to the divergent paths of 'late' capitalist agricultural transformation identified by Lenin: a (reactionary) 'landlord' path driven by the 'internal metamorphosis' of feudal landed property into a new capitalist class exploiting semi-bonded wage-workers through 'labour repressive' means; and a (revolutionary) 'peasant' path that spontaneously generated classes of agrarian capital and wage labour through the social differentiation of rural petty commodity producers subject to the 'dull compulsion' of market relations (Bernstein 1996/7; Byres 1991, 1996). The AFA/AFB distinction was later extended to the 'communal' areas of continental and South Africa by Mamdani (1987, 1988, 1996) and others (e.g. Cousins 2013; Levin 1997; Neocosmos 1993) where, in the apparent absence of large-scale pre-capitalist landed property, one of its terms underwent significant modification. AFB continued to denote the potential for agrarian class differentiation within the ranks of the 'free' peasantry, but AFA now referred to the forcible extraction of surpluses from this rural population by tribal authorities ('chiefs') through oppressively ethnicised ('traditional') relations and mechanisms of extra-economic coercion.

Whatever the value of this revised formulation in the analysis of particular cases, it is evident that entirely new kinds of politically-mediated appropriation have begun to emerge in the contemporary African countryside under the impetus of the 'second scramble' for its natural resources, with their own dynamics and oppositions of 'above' and 'below'. On the one hand, a resurgent chieftaincy has increasingly sought to press exclusive claims to the rent and/or share revenues potentially derived from large-scale mining and other extractive investment on communal land; while, on the other hand, smaller corporate groups at lower levels in the political hierarchy – family, clan, village, etc – are equally attempting to demarcate their private rights in landed resources as a means of either tapping into these new income streams, and/or defending the material bases of their rural livelihoods – however partial or inadequate – from investment-induced dispossession. Drawing on a comparative study conducted across multiple sites on the South African platinum belt, this paper will consider the implications of this shift from the original problematic of AFA/AFB, which was rooted in the divergent class politics of agrarian production, to these new rentier forms of rural appropriation, which entail 'communalist' struggles over the redistribution of the surplus-value produced by extractive capitals, and manifest their own dynamics of elite reaction and popular mobilisation, under current conditions of globalised financialisation.

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